



Ladislao José Biró

[1899-1985]



HUNGARIAN-BORN ARGENTINE INVENTED THE BALLPOINT PEN

Ladislao José Biró was born László József Biró in Hungary on September 29, 1899, a date which is now celebrated in his honor as “Inventor’s Day” in Argentina.

As a young newspaper editor, Biró was frustrated at how long it took to refill fountain pens and how long ink took to dry on a page. Inspired by the quick-drying ink used on printing presses, he recalled an idea offered by a tanner named John Loud in 1888 to mark holes for a leather punch. The concept was simple: use a tiny brass ball in a socket at the nub of the pen. As the pen moved, the ball would rotate, picking up ink from a cartridge or reservoir inside the instrument.

Using basic principles of gravity and capillary action, Biró and his chemist brother György developed a thicker, viscous ink and redesigned Loud’s ball-in-socket system. They presented a prototype at the 1931 Budapest International Fair and patented the idea in 1938.

As war clouds grew over Europe, the Biró brothers fled to Argentina and became citizens. Ladislao Biró refined the pen’s design, obtained a new patent in Argentina and began mass production at a firm called “Biro, Meyne, Biro”, later called “Biró Pens of Argentina”. The name “Biró” became synonymous with the product. To this day, ballpoint pens are called “biromes” (a combining of the names “Biró” and “Meyne”).

The new writing instrument was used by the Royal Air Force in World War II. In 1945, Italian industrialist Marcel Bich bought Biró’s patent and began mass production. In 1953, Bich shortened his company’s name to Bic.



Ladislao José Biró was a tireless tinkerer, inventing an early version of the automobile automatic transmission box and a steam-powered washing machine. He was an accomplished painter and never gave up his roots as an investigative journalist. But he will always be remembered as the man behind the “invention which changed the way we write”.

Biró died in Buenos Aires in 1985, at age 86.



1945 magazine ad courtesy of Roberto Fiadone.

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